

KHALSA TERCENTENARY CELEBRATION

# Sikh History from Persian Sources

*Translations of Major Texts*

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## 4

### A Visit to the Tomb of Gurū Nānak before 1647

From Śūrāt Singh, *Tazkira Pīr Ḥassū Telī*

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The *Tazkiratu'sh Shaikh wa'l-Khadam*, also known as *Tazkira Pīr Ḥassū Telī*, is a metrical work written in the Panjab in the reign of Shāhjahān. It survives in a unique manuscript, possibly autograph, in the Library of the Centre of Advanced Study in History, Aligarh Muslim University. Its author began writing it in A.H. 1055 (A.D. 1644-45) and completed it in A.H. 1057 (A.D. 1647) (MS, ff.181b-182a).

The author, Śūrāt Singh, was of the Kambo caste, the son of Dūnī Chand, and born at Natesar in *pargana* Pattī Haibatpūr (now Patti) in the Punjab. His family were by profession traders, but Śūrāt Singh took to the career of a revenue official, holding posts at Lahore, Bhaṭinda and other places. After his father's death, when he was passing through difficult times, he and his brother Gangā Rām were taken by Shaikh Sitrullāh to Shaikh Kamāl, the chief disciple of Pīr Ḥassū, the oilman (*telī*) saint (d.1603), to be enrolled among his disciples. This was a ṣūfī sect, formally *Malāmatyas*, to which both Hindus and Muslims were admitted.

For Śūrāt Singh's *Tazkira* which is partly an autobiography, partly an account of the miraculous powers of Pīr Ḥassū and Shaikh Kamāl, M. Athar Ali's essay on the work in *Medieval India: a Miscellany*, II, Aligarh/Bombay, 1972, pp.187-94, is a very good guide. From

the *Tazkira* it becomes apparent that Gurū Nānak's religious status was widely accepted in 17th-century Punjab; and he was popular among both Hindus and Muslims. From the *Tazkira* references to Gurū Nānak and the power and popularity of his verses, it is clear that Śūrāt Singh held him to be a great teacher and a master of "Hindī verses" (f.142b). He writes that at a time when his brother was removed from the post of revenue-collector (‘*āmil*) at Jahangirpur, his mother took him to the "village of Bābā Nānak" where they visited his "marī" (*marhī*, funereal shrine). A translation of this portion, Aligarh MS, ff.122b-123a, is offered below. From this it becomes clear that at least till 1647 a shrine and a tomb of the Gurū was extant on the banks of the River Ravi at Kartārpūr. The popular Sikh legend that both these monuments were washed away providentially so as to avoid idolatrous worship of the Gurū's last resting-place, may be correct; but the event would seem to have taken place after 1647, for had the shrine disappeared by the time Śūrāt Singh was composing his work, he would probably have referred to the fact.

According to the Sikh tradition, Gurū Nānak did not leave behind two bodies, as related to Śūrāt Singh by the shrine's attendants. Rather, when the time for Gurū Nānak's parting from this world arrived, and the Muslims wanted to bury him and the Hindus to cremate him, Gurū Nānak told them: "Let the Hindus place flowers on my right and the Musalmans on my left. They whose flowers are found fresh in the morning (after my death), may have the disposal of my body." The Gurū then drew a sheet over himself and departed from this world. When the sheet was removed the next morning it was found that the Gurū's body had miraculously disappeared and the flowers placed on both sides were in bloom. The blooms were then divided and partly cremated and partly buried. (See Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, I, pp.190-91).

From the *Tazkira* it also appears that there was a belief widely held among people like Śūrāt Singh that the spirit of Gurū Nānak had become one with the other great spirits. From two of his mystical experiences Śūrāt Singh claims that Gurū Nānak and Pīr Ḥassū *Telī* had become one. He says (ff.142b-143a, 159a-b) that once he was performing the *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) of the

*dargāh* of his *Pīr* (Ḥassū *Telī*) when 'Bābā Nānak' passed that way. On seeing him performing the circumambulation, a person stopped him and enquired about the mystery (*asrār*) of the graves there. When Ṣūrat Singh informed him about Pīr Ḥassū, Shaikh Kamāl and Sitrullāh and their miracles, he exclaimed, "Yes, if a beggar (*gadā*) begets treasure, he starts performing like a professional dancer". And then he started reciting some of his own "Hindī" verses (*sha'r-i hindī*) which were fit for the occasion. While he was doing so his eyes were sparkling; and on hearing and seeing this, it occurred to Ṣūrat Singh that this person was no other than "Gurū Nānak". But then his own *Pīr* whispered to him: "O the knower of mysteries, the truth is that he was not Nānak. If you see with the eyes of belief, then you will realize it is I who comes before your eyes time and again." Ṣūrat Singh says that he took this person to be Nānak because of his way of recitation and his great verses. But then his *Pīr* warned him, "I tell you, it was not Nānak but I! Whoever becomes your guide, it is I!" Does it, then, mean that Ṣūrat Singh wants to convey the message that the teachings of Gurū Nānak and his own *pīr* were the same, and that they were united in spirit?

At most of the places in his *Tazkira* Ṣūrat Singh generally refers to Gurū Nānak as 'Bābā Nānak'. It is only at one place (f.142b) that he refers to him as "Gurū Nānak".

Ṣūrat Singh's work is an important historical document for understanding how the message of Gurū Nānak was looked at by the mystically inclined in the Panjab. It is one of the first statements in Persian on the Sikh message, it belongs to just about the time the author of the famous account in the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* was collecting his material on Sikhism. For this reason it should surely be of interest to students of Sikh history.

The translation of the account of the author's visit to Gurū Nānak's shrine now follows.

## TRANSLATION

*Tazkira*, Aligarh MS, ff.122b-123a

My mother took hold of my hand and started the journey; we went to the village (*deh*) of Bābā Nānak.

The attendants of the Blessed Shrine (*ḥarīm*) gave the intelligence about him that that beneficent one came by one [the true] path and never came by another.

When we bowed our heads for pilgrimage to [the shrine of] the Bābā, [we saw that] there was a *marī* [*marhī*, funereal shrine], and by the side of the *marī*, was his tomb (*mazār*).

Who can come between the pure body (*jism-i pāk*) and its frame (*mān*) (lit. house) of dust? For the life of those whose hearts have life, an arrow turns into a mere thorn!

They become bodies of air when they are reduced to dust [if they are buried on death] and acquire the form of water, if they are thrown into fire [i.e. are cremated].

## Account of the Death of Bābā Nānak ...

How from the house do you take the warp? [It is] from the shrine of the spiritually-sighted ones, [that] the collyrium for the eyes [comes].

From their presence, the dust becomes collyrium, and they leave in poor state, who draw their skirt through that dust like wind or smoke.

I sought from those serving the *marī*, the mystery of the shrine of the Bābā. A narrator of the tradition gave me an account of it.

That when he [Gurū Nānak] died, leaving this for another abode, Hindus and Muslims gathered around the Bābā's head.

The Hindus said that he was a Hindu, and thus he ought to be cremated. The assemblage of Muslims desired to make a grave for him.

Two bodies of his thereupon came to view: One they took and cremated; and the other was put in front for the [Muslim] funeral prayer.

[But] he left both his bodies and went across to the other side of River Ravi. There an Afghan disciple (*murīd*) had the privilege of a sight of him.

He [Nānak] laid out before him a floor-cloth containing a variety of eatables. The Afghan ate his fill from that laid-out meal.

As is the convention of old, he [the Afghan] spoke and cried out about the ordeal of his journey, in soldierly talk that night.

When that traveller crossed over to this side of the river, he saw the grave and the flames of cremation.

He asked, "Why are these people making all this noise"? [Someone] replied: "Nānak has passed away from this world!".

"The amazing thing is," [he was told,] "that after his death, there came to be two bodies. One is being buried and the other is being cremated".

[The Afghan] said that both [Muslims and Hindus] have done wrong: "I have seen him well settled on the other side of the river".

"I have eaten food and fruits and have talked with him and I have come to this side after taking leave from him."

All became astonished on hearing this and the report of his [Nānak's] moving himself to another place became well known.

Having taken the benefit from the dust of his pure tomb, whose name is *shukr* (thanksgiving), we returned contented to our home.